



## U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge

*Newsletter - Summer 2006*

## Monitoring for Bird Flu

Bird flu has not yet been detected in any birds in Alaska or North America. Last year over 200 ducks on the Yukon Flats were tested for H5N1, the avian influenza virus that causes bird flu. This year we plan to test over 300 ducks.

In most cases the bird flu has been passed from domestic birds to humans, resulting in documented deaths of over 100 people since 2003. While the H5N1 virus poses a serious threat and has a high mortality rate at this time, it is important to keep in perspective that the common flu claims the lives of over 30,000 people each year in the United States. The following are some things you should know and can do for your safety:

- It is safe to hunt and eat ducks, geese and other wild birds, and to eat chicken and turkey from the store, as long as you follow safety precautions by handling and cooking the meat properly.
- Cooking to above 165° F kills the virus, so cook meat all the way through before you eat it.
- Wash your hands and the tools you use after handling, cleaning or cooking birds. Wash with hot soapy water or other sanitary cleaner, and do not eat, drink, smoke or touch your face until after you have washed your hands.
- If you see sick or dead ducks, geese or other wild birds, especially if something you notice seems unusual, call 866/5BRD-FLU.
- The virus does not presently pass easily from person to person. If the virus changes so that it can pass easily from person to person then the situation will be more serious, and new guidelines will be issued.

For updates, go to <[http://alaska.fws.gov/media/avian\\_influenza/](http://alaska.fws.gov/media/avian_influenza/)>. 🦆



Jimmy Fox/USFWS

*Refuge Researcher Kate Martin pauses to admire a newly banded lesser scaup.*

## Potential Land Exchange Update

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service has issued a contract to ENSR, an environmental service firm, to help develop an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) on the proposed land exchange with Doyon, Limited. Public scoping meetings were held in all Yukon Flats area villages, Anchorage, and Fairbanks in March and April 2006. The intent of the meetings was to listen to ideas and concerns that people have so we can focus our review on the issues that are most important to people.

The next step will be to gather information on potential environmental, social, and economic impacts; analyze the information; and draft the EIS. We hope to have a draft EIS available for public review in fall 2007. When the draft EIS is available, we will have another series of meetings to explain the EIS and gather public input before any decisions are made. To learn more, visit <<http://yukonflatseis.ensr.com>>. 🦆

*Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge is pleased to bring you this newsletter. We value your feedback. If you have comments or suggestions about this newsletter please call Education Specialist Shannon Nelson at 800/531-0676 toll free, or e-mail <[shannon\\_nelson@fws.gov](mailto:shannon_nelson@fws.gov)>.*



## In My Words - by Paul Williams, Sr.

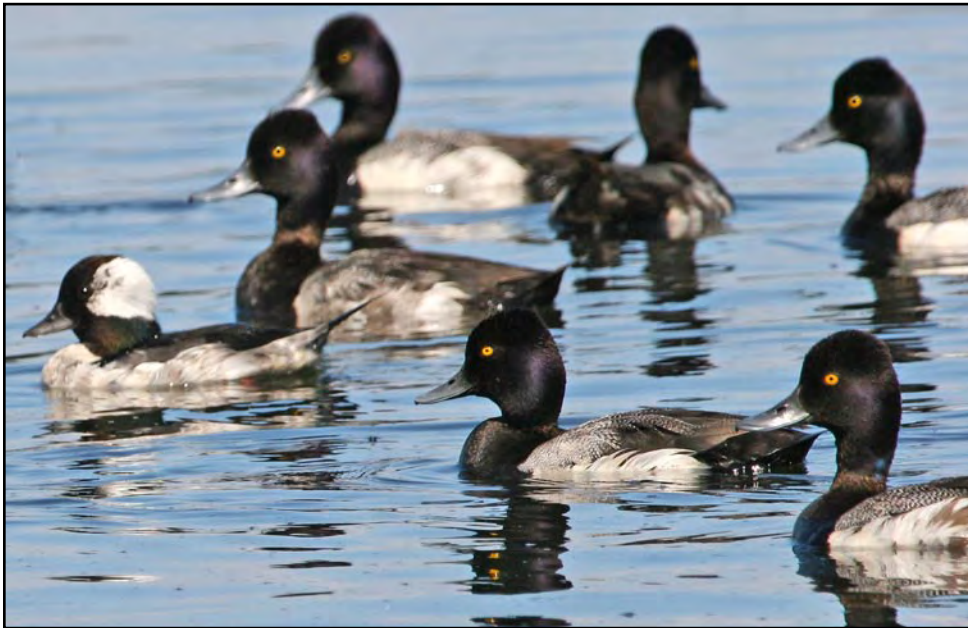
The last time I put words in this newsletter, I told you about the problems we face today because of what happened long ago when I was young. But today we can work together with others to continue our traditional practice of living off the land. The Yukon Flats will always provide food, and we will always have access to these lands, but we can't accomplish that by just living on it – we have to remember our history and teach others about our traditional ways.

We have a lot of responsibility for teaching young people our history and how we got to where we are today. I am 69 years old now and remember things from back in the 1940s when there was a world war. Things are very different today than when I was young. In the past we walked everywhere we went, or used dog teams in the winter. We had no TV, and not everyone had a radio. As young kids we visited with people who had radios for music or news on the war.

Now, we still have the responsibility of making sure our children are taught in a way that ensures their future survival. We elders must go to the young people to tell our history and what we know about the land, the animals, and the environment. You young people, go to school and be on time. Listen to your teachers and learn from them. What you learn from teachers and elders is yours to keep and no one can take that from you. Young people have good opportunities for an education now days so they can enjoy their work and have a good future. I would like to see the youth of today get into management of land, wildlife, and fish. In today's world, a person must have a college degree in order to get a good paying job. 🐾

*Paul Williams, Sr. is a resident of Beaver, Alaska and is employed as an Information Technician for the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge.*

## Taking Part in Duck Hunting Surveys



*Bufflehead and lesser scaup are two common species of ducks on the Yukon Flats.*

The original migratory bird treaties that the United States had with Canada and Mexico failed to recognize Alaska's traditional spring and summer subsistence harvest. Today, rural residents may legally harvest migratory birds in the spring and summer. The new season is the result of an amendment to the treaties. A condition of the agreement establishing the season was that spring and summer harvest would be monitored. So, this summer Refuge staff may ask questions about your duck hunting. Your name will not be used on survey forms, and household information will be kept confidential. This type of information will not and has never been used for enforcement purposes. Reporting an accurate harvest is very important because the information is used to help manage birds throughout Alaska and the rest of the United States. 🐾

## Research on the Chandalar River

This summer Refuge staff and University of Alaska Fairbanks researchers are working together to study salmon in the middle fork of the Chandalar River. Salmon bring nutrients from the ocean to the Yukon Flats. Scientists believe some ecosystems depend upon these "marine-derived nutrients." The two-year project will look at how adult salmon affect the environment and other fish species. Researchers will sample king salmon, Arctic grayling, and sculpin in the spring, summer, and fall. 🐾



Lisa Saperstein/USFWS

*Arctic grayling will be studied to learn more about marine-derived nutrients.*

## Trapping Clinics

Staff from the Yukon Flats and Arctic National Wildlife Refuges visited schools in Manley Hot Springs and Circle in February 2006 to talk with students about trapping furbearers and wildlife management. Approximately 25 students participated in the two clinics where they learned how to skin and handle furs. In Manley Hot Springs, two local trappers assisted by sharing their experience and knowledge of local trapping. 🐾

## Visitor Activity

In summer 2005, guided hunters harvested eight black bears in an area about 20 miles west of Birch Creek. We permit one bear/wolf hunting guide on the western half of the Refuge. We also permit one big game guide on the eastern half of the Refuge. Last year, the guide on the eastern portion of the Refuge had one grizzly bear hunter in the field, and no bears were taken. Air taxi operators reported dropping no unguided hunters or anglers on the Refuge. 🐾



## Are Lakes on the Yukon Flats Drying Up?

Yukon Flats residents report lakes in their areas are drying up at a faster rate than in the past. Scientists also have seen a drying trend from photos taken over the past 50 years. This summer, scientists from the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) will visit several lakes on the Refuge and collect data to help explain why the lakes are drying. They will measure how close permafrost is to the soil surface, collect soil and water samples, and measure the depth of different lakes. Any observations or concerns you have about areas with a lot of lake drying and the effects of lake drying on wildlife populations are most welcome. To contribute or learn more about this project, please contact UAF graduate student Jennifer Roach at 907/474-5404 or <ftjkr@uaf.edu>. 🐾

## Refuge Sheep Study Update

In 2004, Refuge staff began a study to determine where Dall sheep travel in the White Mountains in relation to lands that could be impacted by oil development on the Yukon Flats. The study is being done in cooperation with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Fairbanks Field Office, and the National Park Service (NPS). Originally, 37 sheep were radio-collared. Five sheep were killed by predators or unknown causes during 2005, and nine were killed in 2006. Three sheep were re-collared in October 2005. Currently 26 sheep have active radio collars. To learn more, contact Wildlife Biologist Mark Bertram at 800/531-0676 or <mark\_bertram@fws.gov>. 🐾



Jim Lawler/NPS

Wildlife Biologists Mark Bertram, from the Refuge (left), and Jim HERRIGES, from the BLM, collaring a Dall sheep.

## The Junior Duck Stamp Program in Yukon Flats Area Schools



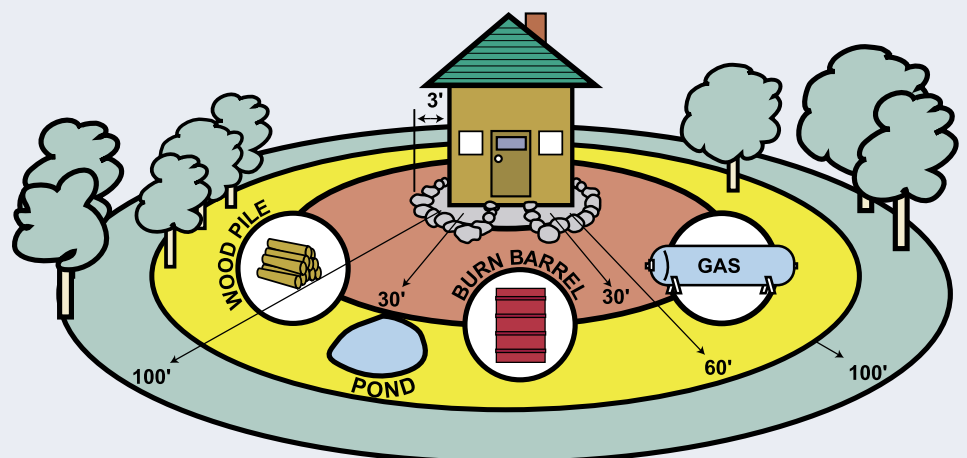
Shannon Nelson/USFWS

Julia Salmon-Fisher of Beaver, Alaska working on her Junior Duck Stamp artwork.

Refuge staff presented the Alaska Federal Junior Duck Stamp Program to more than 200 Yukon Flats area students this year. The Junior Duck Stamp Program combines art and science to teach the importance of waterfowl and wetlands conservation. The program includes an art contest, and this year eight of the 100 Alaska student winners are from Yukon Flats area schools. For more information about Refuge education programs, or to request a school or community visit, contact Education Specialist Shannon Nelson at 800/531-0676 or <shannon\_nelson@fws.gov>. 🐾

## Creating a Wildfire Protection Zone

To protect a house or cabin from an approaching fire, it is a good idea to remove flammable vegetation and to store fuels such as gas, propane, and fuel oil at a safe distance as pictured in the diagram below (distances shown are in feet). Do you use a cabin on the Yukon Flats? If you do, consider working with us to maintain a protective zone to improve the odds that wildland fire will not destroy it. Contact Fire Management Specialist Sam Patten at 800/531-0676 or <sam\_patten@fws.gov>, and go to <<http://fire.ak.blm.gov/>> to learn more. 🐾



## Birch Creek Non-Salmon Fish Study



Lisa Saperstein/USFWS

*Fresh catch: whitefish are a commonly harvested subsistence food from Birch Creek.*

The Refuge, the Council of Athabascan Tribal Governments (CATG), the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, and the Bureau of Land Management Fairbanks Field Office began a fish project on the Yukon Flats in May 2006. The study includes the villages of Birch Creek, Beaver, Fort Yukon, Circle, and Central, and will last for 2.5 years. We are in the process of visiting these villages to discuss the project with tribal councils, and to ask permission to conduct interviews and surveys.

If given permission, we will interview village elders about traditional knowledge on using and sharing non-salmon fish, such as northern pike, Arctic grayling, and whitefish. We will use maps to record traditional fish harvest areas, and important fish spawning and rearing areas. Surveyors from the above villages will be hired to do harvest surveys to get an idea of how much non-salmon fish is used in a year. We will compare these surveys with traditional knowledge and other historical information to look at changes in the use of non-salmon fish over time. Biological information on northern pike in Birch Creek will also be collected. All interviews, maps, and findings will be shared with each village and all survey information will be anonymous – no names will be used.

The study is funded by the Fisheries Resource Monitoring Program of the Office of Subsistence Management. This project is similar to non-salmon fish studies ongoing in the Middle Yukon, Koyukuk, and Tanana River regions. All of these projects will give us a better understanding of non-salmon fish in Interior Alaska. This information is important because it will help improve the management of fish resources, especially when salmon runs are poor. To learn more, contact Subsistence Coordinator Wennona Brown at 800/531-0676 or <wennona\_brown@fws.gov>. 🐟

## Fall 2005 Moose Survey Results

The Council of Athabascan Tribal Governments (CATG) and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game completed a moose population survey in Game Management Unit 25(D) East within the Refuge and near Venetie during fall 2005. The survey was funded through an annual funding agreement between CATG and the Refuge. The estimated moose population on the eastern Yukon Flats was 1008, and 423 near Venetie. A comparison of these estimates with 2004 estimates shows that the population may have increased in these areas. We think that low water levels in recent years may have limited hunters' access to moose, and therefore fewer moose were taken. The fall 2005 survey in Game Management Unit 25(D) West was cancelled due to lack of snow cover. Refuge moose surveys normally take place each fall. To learn more, contact Wildlife Biologist Mark Bertram at 800/531-0676 or <mark\_bertram@fws.gov>. 🐻

## Taking a Closer Look at Ohtig Lake

Ohtig Lake, also known as "Big Lake" near the village of Chalkyitsik, is a major gathering area where ducks in northern Alaska prepare for their migration south. This summer the Refuge will team up with Chalkyitsik Village Council and Tsuk Taih School to take a closer look at the resources on Ohtig Lake. Students, local residents, and biologists will conduct a duck survey, sample fish, and measure the water quality on Ohtig Lake. In fall 2006, Refuge biologists will conduct an aerial survey of ducks gathering on the lake. For more information, contact Wildlife Biologist Mark Bertram at 800/531-0676 or <mark\_bertram@fws.gov>. 🦆

## Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program

Is there a stream bank on your land that needs to be restored or a creek in your community that is blocked so that fish can no longer pass through it? The Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program (PFW) works with private and non-federal landowners to voluntarily restore fish and wildlife habitats on their land. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service is currently looking for potential PFW projects on private and tribal lands within the Yukon Flats. Examples of projects include stream bank restoration and erosion control; replanting native vegetation; restoring wetlands; removing invasive species; and removing barriers to fish passage by removing culverts and putting in bridges. In general, projects require the landowner to supply a 50% match of non-federal funds or in-kind services. Please note that beaver dams are not removed through the PFW Program. If you have an idea for a PFW project, contact Habitat Restoration Biologist Elaine Mayer at 907/456-0209 or <elaine\_mayer@fws.gov>. 🐟



*To learn more about the Refuge visit our web site at <<http://yukonflats.fws.gov/>>, call 800/531-0676, or e-mail <[yukonflats@fws.gov](mailto:yukonflats@fws.gov)>. This newsletter may be viewed at <<http://yukonflats.fws.gov/community.htm>>.*



## It's Good to Have Refuge Friends

Is your opinion on wildlife conservation issues being heard? Do you sometimes feel your voice is lost in this vast state? There is now a way for you to be heard – through the new organization Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges.

The Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges is a non-profit, statewide organization that promotes the conservation of natural resources on all 16 of Alaska's National Wildlife Refuges, including the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge. The group is comprised of members from all over the state (and a few from the Lower 48) who share a passion for our natural resources. The Friends' goals are to educate the public and decision makers about Alaska's National Wildlife Refuges and to assist Refuges in accomplishing their missions.

Friends members receive an educational newsletter and will become part of a network to learn about current issues and events on Alaska's Refuges. The Friends have recently produced a brochure and are working toward developing a web site. The Friends are looking for volunteers to help with an invasive plant pull along the Dalton Highway the week of July 10, 2006; all trip expenses will be paid for. If you are interested, please contact the Friends.

The Friends are looking for more rural members and anyone who would like to become involved with Alaska's Refuges and local wildlife conservation issues. If you would like to join the Friends, e-mail <akrefugefriends@gmail.com> or call the Friends northern refuges representative Debbie Miller at 907/479-2189. 🐦



Nurturing refuges beyond our own time

## Invasive Plants on the Yukon Flats



University of Alaska Anchorage Archives. www.forestryimages.com

*Please keep an eye out for white sweetclover, pictured above, on the Yukon Flats.*

What is natural diversity? It is all fish, wildlife, and plants that naturally occur in an ecosystem that are not a result of an introduction. Plants that do not naturally occur in an area are called “non-native” or “exotic.” A small group of these exotic plants can be very aggressive and take over native vegetation. These species are often referred to as “noxious” or “invasive.” Invasive plants spread rapidly, crowding out native vegetation. Refuge biologists are concerned that invasive plants, which may be harmful to native fish, wildlife, and their habitats, will show up on Refuge lands.

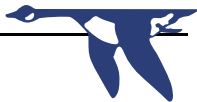
There are two ways that non-native and invasive plants normally get into an area. Someone may plant them on purpose because they are pretty, or these plants may get started by accident. For example, it is easy for plant seeds or plant parts to get carried into a new area on ATVs, boats, aircraft, bedding straw, chain saws, boot laces, animals, or by wind and water. Invasive plants are just starting to show up in Alaska's rural villages and remote areas. Because invasive plants have harmed habitats in the Lower 48, state and federal agencies and other groups in Alaska are hoping to keep these harmful plants out of Alaska's natural areas. We all need to work together to make sure these plants do not get started on the Yukon Flats. To do that, Refuge biologists need your help to keep an eye out for any invasive plants.

In 2005, Refuge staff, agency partners, and volunteers looked for non-native and invasive plants on Beaver Creek, visiting 52 sites on Refuge lands. We found the common dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) and a few other non-native plants at 12 sites. One of the plants we were looking for but did not find was white sweetclover (*Melilotus alba*), which is pictured above. White sweetclover is one of the more aggressive invasive plants in Alaska. It has been found in Southeast Alaska, along the Matanuska and Nenana Rivers, and near the Yukon River Crossing. Look for this plant in open, disturbed areas like roadsides, boat landings, and gravel bars. Once established, this plant can take over a large area and prevent native plants from growing there. This could impact the people and wildlife that depend on native plants for food and cover. For example, Japanese knotweed (*Polygonum cuspidatum*), a fast spreading invasive plant, is taking over people's favorite salmonberry patches in many southeast Alaska communities. It is this kind of event that we hope to prevent on the Yukon Flats.

If you see white sweetclover or other plants that you think may be invasive on the Yukon Flats, please let us know where and when so that we can work together to keep harmful plants out of the Yukon Flats. To learn more, contact Wildlife Biologist Delia Vargas Kretsinger at 800/531-0676 or <delia\_vargas\_kretsinger@fws.gov>. For more information about invasive plants, visit <[http://akweeds.uaa.alaska.edu/akweeds\\_ranking\\_page.htm](http://akweeds.uaa.alaska.edu/akweeds_ranking_page.htm)>. 🐦

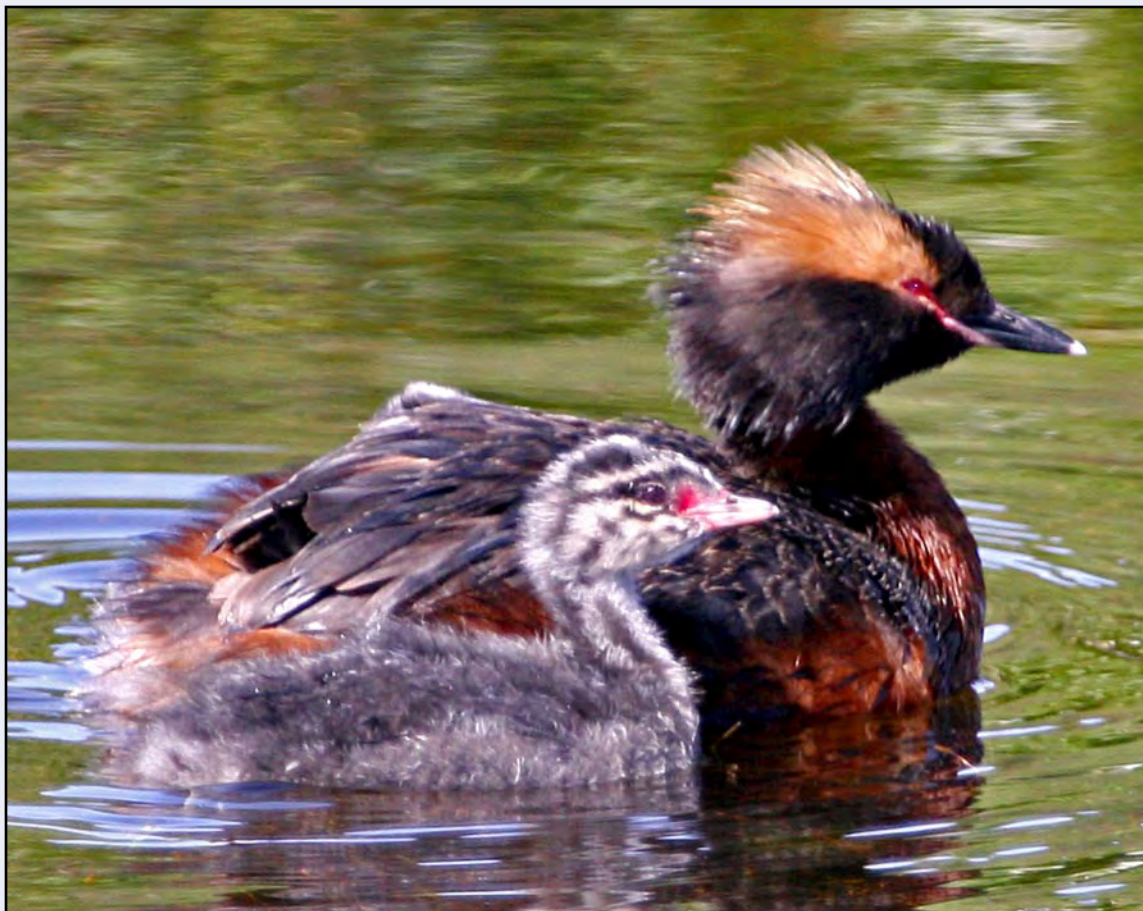
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*Horned grebes, or "Nootsik" in Gwich'in, are found in Interior Alaska, but their numbers are declining across North America. Grebes on the Refuge are being studied to help find out why.*



*Grebes depend on healthy wetlands within the Yukon Flats to nest and raise their young each summer.*